

Leibniz vs. transmigration: a previously unpublished text from the early 1700s

Lloyd Strickland (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Abstract

In this paper I analyze a previously unpublished Leibniz text from the early 1700s. I give it the title “On unities and transmigration” since it contains an outline of his doctrine of unities and an examination of the doctrine of transmigration. The text is valuable because in it Leibniz considers three very specific versions of transmigration that he does not address elsewhere in his writings; these are: (1) where a soul is released by the destruction of its body and is then free to pass into another body; (2) where souls are exchanged without any destruction of bodies; and (3) where human souls (minds) are exchanged, again without any destruction of bodies. I show that when tackling these three versions of transmigration in “On unities and transmigration”, Leibniz develops a series of objections that are not to be found anywhere else in his published writings, despite his lifelong opposition to the doctrine of transmigration. This paper is completed by two appendices, the first of which presents the previously-unpublished “On unities and transmigration” text in full, in the original French (with all deletions indicated), while the second presents it in English translation.

It is remarkable that even three hundred years after his death in 1716, Leibniz's corpus has still not been published in its entirety, and that the full range and depth of his thinking is still not fully known. As a good illustration, I present here a previously unpublished metaphysical text that will eventually be included in volume 5 of series VI of the Akademie edition, which collects together Leibniz's philosophical writings. The text in question begins with Leibniz outlining his doctrine of unities and then drawing out its implications, before moving on to consider the doctrine of transmigration (though curiously he does not make use of the term). In this latter part, Leibniz presents a series of objections to transmigration, many of which are, to the best of my knowledge, unique to this text.

The text itself exists only as a draft, and looks to be what we might call a "working paper" in which Leibniz thinks through a problem as he writes. He left the text without a title, but as its principal themes are unities and transmigration, I propose to refer to it as "On unities and transmigration".¹ Paul Ritter, compiler of the Ritterkatalog, dated the text to 1691,² but the Akademie editors propose a later date of 1702 on the basis that the text was found in the middle of a pile of papers dating from that year, including a sketch of a letter to Bayle from December 1702.³ Internal evidence supports this dating, and possibly even a slightly later one. Leibniz's liberal use of "unities" is certainly consistent with that of other writings from the early 1700s.⁴ However, more noteworthy is his use of the terms "physical

¹ The text has been given the provisional title of "De l'ame et du corps" [On the soul and body] by the Akademie editors.

² See the entry in the online Ritterkatalog:

http://ritter.bbaw.de/ritter/Suche/Datenblatt/suche_datenblatt?ort=&jahr1=&jahr2=&adressat=&absender=&IN_CIPIT=&Titel=&SIGN_oL=LBr%2040%20Bl.%2022&sort=Titel&anzeige:int=1 [accessed 18 August 2016]

³ The editor in question is Stefan Luckscheiter.

⁴ See for example "The soul and its operations", 12 June 1700, A I 18: 113–117/LTS 197–202. In this paper I use the following abbreviations when referring to Leibniz's works:

A = *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, eds. Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923–). Multiple volumes in 8 series, cited by series (reihe) and volume (band).

AG = *Philosophical Essays*, trans. and ed. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989).

DSR = *De summa rerum*, trans. and ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

FC = *Lettres et Opuscules Inédits de Leibniz*, ed. Louis Alexandre Foucher de Careil (Paris: Ladrangue, 1854).

G = *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–1890).

GM = *Mathematische Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 volumes (Berlin: A. Asher, 1849–1863).

K = *Die Werke von Leibniz*, ed. Onno Klopp, 11 volumes (Hanover: Klindworth, 1864–1884).

L = *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969).

LBr = unpublished manuscript held by the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Hannover.

LDV = *The Leibniz-De Volder Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Paul Lodge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

LH = unpublished manuscript held by the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Hannover.

LM = *Leibniz's Monadology*, trans. and ed. Lloyd Strickland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

LNS = *Leibniz's 'New System'*, trans. and ed. R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

LTS = *Leibniz and the Two Sophies*, trans. and ed. Lloyd Strickland (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

NE = *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

PW = *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Mary Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (London: Dent, 1973).

RIS = *Réfutation inédite de Spinoza*, ed. Louis Alexandre Foucher de Careil (Paris: E. Brière, 1854).

RRDS = *A Refutation Recently Discovered of Spinoza by Leibniz*, trans. Rev. Octavius Freire Owen (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co., 1855).

SLT = *Shorter Leibniz Texts*, trans. and ed. Lloyd Strickland (London: Continuum, 2006).

When quoting from these sources, I cite the original language source first, followed by that of an English translation, where available. Where no English translation is available the translation is my own.

identity” and “moral identity”; both are used in the *New Essays on Human Understanding* of 1703-5, and as far as I can tell, entered Leibniz’s philosophical vocabulary around that time. In “On unities and transmigration”, he employs the terms as though they are already established rather than being newly coined, suggesting that the text may be contemporaneous with the *New Essays*. In addition, as we shall see, some of Leibniz’s arguments in the text are illuminated by claims made in the *New Essays*.

“On unities and transmigration” covers a good part of Leibniz’s metaphysics in a very short space. The focus for much of the text is the existence and nature of unities, including their modifications and changes, their perceptions, their fate, and that each unity has an organic body (that is, a body with infinitely structured organs). The text then turns to a consideration of the doctrine of transmigration, which Leibniz rejects after raising three separate objections to it. Given that these objections differ from those Leibniz used elsewhere, they will be the focus of the remainder of my paper. By way of providing some context, I shall outline (in section 1) the various objections to transmigration that can be found in that part of Leibniz’s corpus that has thus far been published. I shall then elucidate (in section 2) the objections found in “On unities and transmigration”. The complete transcription of this text, along with an English translation, can be found as an appendix to this paper.

1. Leibniz on transmigration

The doctrine of transmigration, or metempsychosis, holds that souls never die, and that at the end of one life they pass from one body to another, thereby giving rise to a new living thing. It was adopted by Pythagoras (c. 569-475 BCE) and Origen (185-254), endorsed by the heterodox thinker Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), and defended in Leibniz’s day by the Lurianic Kabbalist Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614-1698). Leibniz appears not to have entertained it at any point in his life, instead cleaving to an alternative account of the fate of bodies and souls inspired by the work of microscopists such as Marcello Malpighi (1628-1694), Jan Swammerdam (1637-1680), and Antoni van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723), of which Leibniz was aware early in his career. Their discoveries, especially that of the foetus, convinced Leibniz that the bodies of living things had existed in a pre-formed state prior to birth, and that birth simply marked the point at which the animal’s pre-existing body enlarged and developed. This in turn led Leibniz to believe that death was no more than the same process in reverse, whereby an animal’s body shed its organs and became smaller in size. There was thus for Leibniz neither generation of a new animal nor death of an existing one, but merely the transformation of one and the same animal (development and envelopment). Another discovery, that of protozoa, convinced Leibniz that there was life everywhere, and that all creatures were animated prior to birth and would remain so after death, this in turn suggesting that all creatures were permanently ensouled (or alternatively that all souls were permanently embodied).⁵ From the 1670s until the end of his life, Leibniz often appealed to these ideas as representing a more plausible alternative to the doctrine of transmigration.⁶ Moreover, for a good part of his career, Leibniz’s resistance to the doctrine of transmigration was based entirely on his alternative account. We know this because all of Leibniz’s

⁵ For further details of how the work of the early microscopists shaped Leibniz’s metaphysical thinking, see Alessandro Becchi, “Between learned science and technical knowledge: Leibniz, Leeuwenhoek and the school for Microscopists”, in *Tercentenary Essays on the Philosophy and Science of Leibniz*, eds. Lloyd Strickland, Erik Vynckier, and Julia Weckend (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017), 47-79.

⁶ For example, see “New system”, 27 June 1695, G IV 480/SLT 71 (and also the draft, G IV 474/LNS 24); “Letter on what is independent of sense and matter”, mid-June (?) 1702, A I 21, 346/LTS 246; “The principles of nature and grace”, 1714, G VI 601/LM 273.

philosophical writings up to 1690 have now been published,⁷ and in those we find that, prior to the 1690s, his discussions of transmigration are few and far between and typically follow the pattern just mentioned. Leibniz's engagement with the doctrine of transmigration prior to the 1690s can be summarised as follows:

In 1676 he claimed that "The transmigration of souls is adequately refuted by recent experiments on the pre-formed foetus",⁸ albeit without further elaboration. In 1679 he suggested that Pythagoras did not believe in the doctrine of transmigration.⁹ In a letter from 1683 he described Pythagoras' doctrine of transmigration as "a corruption of a noble truth".¹⁰ In 1687 he claimed that one should believe in the transformation of one and the same animal rather than in the transmigration of souls,¹¹ the former being "more reasonable"¹² than the latter position, which is "mistaken"¹³ or amounts to saying nothing.¹⁴ In 1688 he sketched out the plan for a work that would show *inter alia* that metamorphosis (transformation) is to be favoured over metempsychosis (transmigration),¹⁵ and in another text from the same year he insists that transformation is to be preferred over transmigration.¹⁶

Over the course of the 1670s and 1680s, then, Leibniz did not object to the doctrine of transmigration head-on; instead, he typically made a case for transformation of one and the same animal, and rejected transmigration seemingly on the grounds that it was a rival position. This was to change in the 1690s when Leibniz began to develop specific objections to the idea of transmigration that went beyond simply presenting it as an implausible alternative to his own belief in the transformation of animals. In the remainder of this section I shall consider two such objections, which I shall term "the argument from continuity" and "the argument from histories".

"The argument from continuity" is arguably Leibniz's most famous objection to transmigration.¹⁷ It is based on his principle of continuity, which holds that "any change from

⁷ The first four volumes of series VI of the Akademie edition bring together all of Leibniz's philosophical writings up to 1690 (a separate volume contains the *New Essays* from 1703-5), and the first three volumes of series II contain all of Leibniz's philosophical correspondence up to 1700. There is also some philosophical material to be found in series I, which collects together Leibniz's general, political and historical correspondence; to date, 24 volumes of this series has been published, covering the period up to July 1705.

⁸ "Excerpts from notes on science and metaphysics", 18 and 22 March 1676, A VI 3, 394/DSR 47.

⁹ Thus Leibniz claims that Pythagoras advanced his doctrine of metempsychosis "to adapt himself to the capacities of the common man, while among his disciples he reasoned in a completely different way." Leibniz to unidentified recipient, 1679, A II 1, 778/<http://www.leibniz-translations.com/cartesianism1679.htm> [accessed 23 August 2016]

¹⁰ Leibniz to Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff, 24 December 1683/3 January 1684, A II 1, 850.

¹¹ "Many of them [sc. thinkers such as Aristotle, Hippocrates, Magnus, Bacon and Fernel] believed in transmigration, others in the traduction of souls, instead of noticing the transmigration that also transforms an animal already formed." Leibniz to Arnauld, 9 October 1687, A II 2, 247/L 342

¹² "It is incomparably more reasonable, accordingly, to conceive of transformations of animated bodies than to imagine the passage of souls from one body to another, an ancient conviction which apparently comes only from transformation poorly understood." Leibniz to Arnauld, 9 October 1687, A II 2, 256/L 346.

¹³ "The ancients were mistaken in introducing the transmigration of souls instead of the transformations of the same animal which always preserves the same soul; they put *metempsychoses pro metaschematismis* [change of souls in place of change of shape]." Leibniz to Arnauld, 30 April 1687, A II 2, 189/AG 88.

¹⁴ "The Pythagoreans have disguised the truth by their metempsychoses; instead of conceiving the transformations of one and the same animal, they believed or at least talked of the passages of an animal's soul into another, which is to say nothing." Leibniz to Foucher, 23 May 1687, A II 1, 202.

¹⁵ "De arte characteristica ad perficiendas scientias ratione nitentes", summer 1688?, A VI 4, 911.

¹⁶ "And instead of the transmigration of souls (which has been imperfectly understood, I believe) one must maintain the transformation of animals." "Specimen inventorum de admirandis naturae generalis arcanis", 1688?, A VI 4, 1624/PW 83.

¹⁷ At least among recent commentators. It is discussed, for example, in C. D. Broad, *Leibniz: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 84, 114-115; Stuart Brown, "Soul, body and natural

small to large, or vice versa, passes through something which is, in respects of degrees as well as parts, in between”,¹⁸ or more pithily that “nature never proceeds by leaps”.¹⁹ In accordance with this, all natural change, including that of the composition of the body, happens by degrees rather than all at once. Leibniz often insists that this allows for metamorphosis, that is, a change of shape or form, as occurs in the transformation of caterpillar to butterfly, but rules out the transmigration of the soul.²⁰ After all, transmigration would involve the soul suddenly “jumping” bodies, effectively disappearing from one body and reappearing in another. The clearest example of this objection is to be found in a text on the philosophy of Spinoza (1707?), in which Leibniz writes:

in reality there is no transition of the soul from body to body, except insofar as the body itself is insensibly changed. Metempsychosis would be against the rule that nothing takes place by a leap. The transition of the soul from body to body would be the same as a body going from place to place by a leap, without crossing through intermediate places. In all this there is a deficiency of argument.²¹

In other iterations of this objection, Leibniz explains that the problem with transmigration is that it is violated by “order”. Hence he writes in 1715:

As for metempsychosis, I believe that order does not allow it; it demands that everything be explicable distinctly, and that nothing happen by leap. But the passage of the soul from one body into another would be a strange and inexplicable leap.²²

The claim that transmigration would not be in keeping with order can be found much earlier in Leibniz’s work, for example in the draft of a letter to Electress Sophie written in 1694, wherein Leibniz writes:

It is not that I believe in the transmigration of souls; but I believe in the transformation of one and the same animal, which sometimes becomes big, sometimes small, and takes various forms, as we see happen with silkworms when they become moths. This is more in keeping with order than transmigration.²³

However, Leibniz does not say enough here to enable us to conclude that transmigration is not in keeping with order because it would violate the law of continuity. (As we shall see, in “On unities and transmigration” Leibniz puts forward a number of objections based on the notion of order which have nothing to do with the law of continuity.)

As noted above, Leibniz developed a second objection to transmigration, “the argument from histories”. This is directed against the version of the doctrine defended by his friend, the Lurianic Kabbalist thinker Francis Mercury van Helmont. In addition to believing that souls transmigrate, van Helmont also claimed that there are a fixed number of souls

immortality”, *The Monist* 81 (1998), 573-590, at 581; and Dionysios A. Anapolitanos, *Leibniz: Representation, Continuity and the Spatiotemporal* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999), 67-68.

¹⁸ *New Essays on Human Understanding*, 1703-5, A VI 6 56/NE56.

¹⁹ Leibniz to Sophie, 6 February 1706, G VII 567/LTS 348. See also FC 227/SLT 137; GM VI 248/L 447; A II 3, 545/LDV 69.

²⁰ For example, he writes in the *Monadology* (1714): “Thus the soul only changes body bit by bit and by degrees, so that it is never stripped of all its organs all at once. In animals there is often metamorphosis, but never metempsychosis or transmigration of souls.” G VI 619/LM 28.

²¹ “A Refutation Recently Discovered of Spinoza”, 1707?, RIS 76/RRDS 154-155 [translation modified].

²² Leibniz to Remond, 11 November 1715, G III 635/L 658 [translation modified].

²³ Leibniz to Sophie, 3/13 September 1694, LH I 5, 2, 3-4/LTS 106.

which undergo a series of “revolutions” that always places them into bodies of the same species, such that a fish soul always returns in a fish body etc. As he put it in a text from 1696:

A human generation goes away, the same generation returns etc...
The rivers run toward the sea and return to the sea, and the sea does not get filled; the [number of] fish does not decrease or increase, the same fish return.²⁴

Consequently, as there is always the same number of souls in circulation, the number of humans and every species of animal in the world remains constant. To this, Leibniz objects that historical records and census reports suggest that the population has in fact increased rather than remained the same:

I had to doubt this [sc. Van Helmont’s doctrine] on the basis of histories, and had to believe that the world has not always been equally densely inhabited. It is also to be found, from the printed registers of births and deaths in the City of London, that after the end of the Great Plague numbers were made up not only by the addition of an extremely large number of births, but also by the addition of new inhabitants.²⁵

Consequently, van Helmont’s version of transmigration is undermined by experience. Leibniz was rather more conciliatory when writing to van Helmont himself, advising him only that his view required further verification:

The Spanish have certainly destroyed the men of some islands of America. The question is merely whether it is true, according to your opinion, that when enough of some species is left to propagate the race, births are more frequent after a great number of deaths. This is something which deserves to be verified more exactly.²⁶

I take it that Leibniz’s decision to moderate his criticism of van Helmont’s doctrine of transmigration when writing to van Helmont himself is more likely due to his desire not to offend a friend than it is to him having softened his opposition to the doctrine.

2. The objections from “On unities and transmigration”

As we have seen, by the 1700s Leibniz had developed a series of objections to the doctrine of transmigration.²⁷ It is notable, however, that he does not make use of any of them in “On

²⁴ “Some of Mr. Helmont’s thoughts”, September 1696, A I 13, 708/LTS 128.

²⁵ “Thoughts on van Helmont’s doctrines”, first half of October (?), 1696, LTS 135.

²⁶ Leibniz to van Helmont, 18/28 October 1696, A II 3, 208. Van Helmont seems not to have responded to this.

²⁷ A third possible objection is hinted at in one text in which, having outlined his views on the transformation of one and the same animal, Leibniz goes on to suggest that the alternative view of transmigration is “contrary to the laws of nature”, though unfortunately he does not elaborate further. See Leibniz to Rabener, January (?) 1698, A I 15, 261: “to speak more properly, not only the soul but also the animal itself continues to exist. Organs always remain joined to it. For how truly admirable is the nature of the machines of the divine craftsman that no force can destroy them. Consequently, just as generation is only the increase and so to speak the bringing forth into a larger theatre of an animal already living, so conversely is death to be thought of as only a sort of diminution, which some of the ancients have recognized also. Accordingly, we should think not of the μετεμψύχωσις [metempsychosis] of souls, a thing contrary to the laws of nature, but the μεταμόρφωσις [metamorphosis] of animals.” It is possible to see Leibniz as here referring rather obliquely to what I have termed the argument from continuity. Although the principle of continuity, upon which the argument from continuity is based, is a metaphysical principle rather than a law of nature as such, Leibniz appears to have held that nature and its laws were fashioned in accordance with it, from which it would follow that if transmigration violated the principle of continuity then it would violate the laws of nature as well.

unities and transmigration”, instead developing new ones which, as far as I can ascertain, were not employed again in subsequent writings. This may suggest that Leibniz was not happy with the objections, but a more plausible reason is that in this text Leibniz does not engage with transmigration *simpliciter*, as he typically does elsewhere, but instead concerns himself with three specific versions of it, namely: (1) where a soul is released by the destruction of its body and is then free to pass into another body; (2) where souls are exchanged without any destruction of bodies; and (3) where human souls (minds) are exchanged, again without any destruction of bodies. Each of Leibniz’s three objections is targeted at one of these versions of transmigration. We shall consider each in turn.

2.1. Objection 1: the argument from distinct explanation

In “On unities and transmigration”, the discussion of transmigration occurs after Leibniz asks “whether it is possible that there are some substances which pass from body to body in a certain order and others which are always attached to the same body.”²⁸ His answer to that question, which thus constitutes his first objection to transmigration, is this:

But I doubt this change could be distinctly explained, and consequently I doubt it is in conformity with order. For we would have to suppose the destruction of an organic body in order to deprive it of the soul, for every organic body has in it – by dint of reason – what it can fittingly have in it. And every organic body of nature, being infinitely enfolded, is indestructible. And the proof that it is infinitely enfolded is that it expresses everything.²⁹

Here Leibniz supposes that if transmigration were to occur, it would involve a soul first being released from its current body, which he implies could only happen if that body was destroyed. But as the body cannot be destroyed, souls could not be released from one body in order to pass into another. It is notable that Leibniz is here restricting himself to what is *naturally* possible, rather than what is possible per se.³⁰ his point is that organic bodies cannot *naturally* be destroyed (and thus that souls cannot naturally be released from their body). The reason for this is to be found earlier in the text, when Leibniz explains that an organic body is indestructible on account of “the fact that the least part of the organic body is also organic, nature’s machines being folded in themselves to infinity. Thus fire and any other external forces can only ever disturb the outside.”³¹ While the natural destruction of bodies is ruled out, a non-natural destruction – which would involve them being annihilated by God – is not. Consequently, the objection says in effect that this particular form of transmigration, were it to occur, would involve a non-natural, i.e. miraculous event, and as such would not be amenable to distinct explanation. (The idea that a non-natural event would not be distinctly explicable, implicit in “On unities and transmigration”, is stated explicitly in the *New Essays*, where Leibniz distinguishes between “what is natural and explicable and what is miraculous and inexplicable”.³²) And as a non-natural event, it would be contrary to the order that God has established. This allows Leibniz to feel entitled to reject this form of transmigration, for he asserts in the *New Essays* that “we are entitled to deny (within the natural order at least)

²⁸ LBr 40 Bl. 22v.

²⁹ LBr 40 Bl. 23r. For a helpful discussion on why the soul is required for the body to express everything, see Pauline Phemister, “The souls of seeds”, in *Leibniz’s Metaphysics and Adoption of Substantial Forms*, ed. Adrian Nita (Springer: Dordrecht, 2015), 125-141, especially 137-139.

³⁰ This is actually evident from the way he poses his initial question, which asks whether transmigration can occur “in a certain order”, i.e. in a way consistent with the natural order of things that God has established.

³¹ LBr 40 Bl. 22v.

³² A VI 6, 66/NE 66.

whatever is absolutely unintelligible and inexplicable”, since “everything which is in accord with the natural order can be conceived or understood by some creature”.³³

It is surely noteworthy that Leibniz’s concern with this form of transmigration is only that it involves the destruction of the body. He does not touch upon – let alone object to – the passage of a soul to another body. His objection is simply that such a process could not get started.

2.2. Objection 2: the argument from expression

Leibniz’s second objection to transmigration tries to show that if a soul did transmigrate, it would have to do so as part of an exchange of souls, which then raises the question of whether this exchange would be expressed in bodies or not. He writes:

Assuming that no new organic bodies are formed and that the old ones are not destroyed, what indication will we have to say that the soul of one organic body has gone into another, besides that two souls are not in the same organic body, and that there would thus have to be an exchange of souls? Moreover, this exchange of souls is noticeable in bodies or it isn’t: if it is not noticeable, it is contrary to order since the body must express everything. If it should be noticeable there, we would have to see how that might happen. What means are there of expressing the passage of a soul by the laws of mechanics?³⁴

Here Leibniz all but rules out the suggestion that a soul exchange would leave no mark on bodies: indeed, his commitment to the view that the body expresses everything, articulated here and elsewhere,³⁵ surely leaves him unable to countenance such a scenario. So if there were to be an exchange of souls, Leibniz is committed to holding that the event would be expressed by bodies. This leads him to wonder how the passage of souls might be expressed in bodies by the laws of mechanics. While Leibniz’s language might suggest he is leaving the question open, it is not unreasonable to construe him as instead asking a rhetorical question which he does not expect to have an answer. In fact it is difficult to imagine otherwise.

2.3. Objection 3: the argument from identity

Leibniz’s final objection to transmigration seeks to show that even if some souls do transmigrate, the highest class of them, namely minds or “intelligences”, do not. For Leibniz, the category of “minds” includes not just human beings but also higher (superhuman) beings such as genii and angels;³⁶ moreover, he insisted throughout his career that such beings were, like humans, always embodied,³⁷ with God being the only mind that exists without a body.³⁸ Accordingly, it is reasonable to suppose that Leibniz’s objection to the transmigration of minds is intended to rule out the transmigration of any created mind whatsoever, even though the example he uses involves a human mind. The objection goes as follows:

Now it would be possible for one and the same intelligence to pass from one body into another. In that case, the mechanical laws themselves would make reborn

³³ A VI 6, 65/NE 65.

³⁴ LBr 40 Bl. 23r.

³⁵ For example G VI 617/LM 27.

³⁶ See for example G VI 605/LM 276.

³⁷ See for example Leibniz to Sophie, early(?) March 1706, K IX 174/LTS 357: “God alone is an intelligence separated from all body, whereas all other intelligences—Genies, Angels, and Demons—are accompanied by organic bodies in their way.”

³⁸ See for example G VI 619/LM 28: “neither are there any entirely *separate souls*, nor genies without bodies. God alone is entirely detached from body.”

elsewhere a life which continues my life, and an intelligence which claims for itself what has happened to me, its perceptions and the movements of its body (which mutually correspond) leading it to have thoughts that would, in effect, be the memory of the principal things that have happened to me, so that morally this intelligence would be me, and would continue as me. That seems possible, but it seems to me more in keeping with order that moral identity is always accompanied by a physical identity, and that each unity, being the universe in miniature, is governed also according to moral laws.³⁹

To understand this objection, we first need to understand Leibniz's distinction between physical identity and moral identity, which can be found outlined in the *New Essays*. There, Leibniz claims that physical identity (understood as real identity rather than as the identity of the body),⁴⁰ is grounded in the continuation of the same substance.⁴¹ Moral or personal identity, on the other hand, is that which confers moral responsibility on a substance, and thus makes it liable for reward and punishment. In the *New Essays*, Leibniz suggests that moral identity is grounded in self-consciousness,⁴² or memories that involve self-reference,⁴³ that is, memories such as “*I did this*” or “*this happened to me*”.⁴⁴ As only minds possess self-consciousness and self-referring memories, only minds possess moral identity in addition to physical identity; lesser substances, such as animals, have only physical identity. This thinking is to be found in earlier writings, such as the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686),⁴⁵ as well as later ones like the *New Essays*,⁴⁶ suggesting that Leibniz would have held it also when writing “On unities and transmigration”.

With this in mind, let us now return to Leibniz's final argument from that text: there we find him entertaining the possibility that a mind (“intelligence”) passes from one organic body to another, or rather that a mind passes into Leibniz's own organic body, replacing his own which is transferred elsewhere. In such a case, he claims, the mind that passes into Leibniz's body will end up with Leibniz's memories. This would happen, we may suppose, by virtue of the pre-established harmony, which ensures that the replacement mind would have perceptions that correspond with those of Leibniz's body, which itself expresses its own past and future states. In effect, then, the replacement mind in Leibniz's body would, for moral purposes, actually be Leibniz, and would therefore be liable for reward and punishment based on actions that Leibniz himself had performed. An obvious worry with this scenario concerns the injustice of rewarding or punishing the replacement mind for actions that it took no part in, entirely on the basis of its non-veridical memories. But this is not the problem

³⁹ LBr 40 Bl. 23r.

⁴⁰ See Remnant's and Bennett's notes on “physical identity” in NE xxii, and lxxxv-lxxxvi.

⁴¹ A VI 6, 237-238/NE 237-238. See also Leibniz to Jacquelot, 28 April 1704, G III 474.

⁴² A VI 6, 236/NE 236.

⁴³ A VI 6, 233/NE 233.

⁴⁴ In contrast, Locke located the identity of the human being in the continuation of the same life, or rather the continuation of the organization of the body (which persists through changes in constituent parts), and personal identity in consciousness, or psychological continuity. See John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (London: J. F. Dove, 1828), 218 and 220-221.

⁴⁵ “[T]he intelligent soul, knowing what it is and being able to say *I*, which says so much, not merely remains and subsists metaphysically ... but also remains the same morally and constitutes the same person. For it is the memory or the knowledge of this *I* which makes it capable of punishment and reward.” *Discourse on Metaphysics*, A VI 4, 1584/L 325 [translation modified]. “[M]inds must retain their personalities and their moral qualities, so that the City of God loses no person; they must particularly preserve a kind of reminiscence or consciousness or the power to know what they are, upon which depends the whole of their morality, penalties, and punishments.” Leibniz to Arnould, 9 October 1687, A II 2, 258/L 347 [translation modified]. In the copy of the despatched letter, this was changed to “reminiscence, consciousness, or power...”

⁴⁶ See also Leibniz to Sophie, 29 November 1707, K IX, 288/LTS 363.

Leibniz himself raises. Instead, his concern is that, if an exchange of minds were to occur as described, it would mean that there would be moral identity in the absence of physical identity, which he considers to be not in keeping “with order”. Implicit here is Leibniz’s belief that order requires moral identity to be bound to physical identity. That belief is more explicit in the *New Essays*, when Leibniz considers a number of examples involving transmigrating minds. At the conclusion of one of these he writes:

I acknowledge that if all the appearances of one mind were changed and transferred to another, or if God brought about an exchange between two minds by giving the visible body, appearances and states of consciousness of one to the other, then personal identity, instead of being tied to the identity of substance, would follow the constant appearances, which are what human morality must be heedful of.⁴⁷

Leibniz’s point here is that if transmigration were to occur among human beings, it would lead to cases where moral identity (referred to in the above as “personal identity”) is not tied to physical identity (“identity of substance”), and he goes on to claim that “this is not in conformity with the natural order”.⁴⁸ Similarly, after considering another case of transmigration, in which consciousnesses transfer between minds, Leibniz writes: “I admit that if God brought it about that consciousnesses were transferred to other souls, the latter would have to be treated according to moral notions as though they were the same. But this would disrupt the order of things for no reason”.⁴⁹

Leibniz thus holds that in the order of things, moral identity tracks physical identity, and since a transmigration of minds would upset this, it is contrary to order. So stated, the force of his objection to transmigration is not immediately obvious. Why is it “more in keeping with order that moral identity be always accompanied by a physical identity”, as he puts it in “On unities and transmigration”? One possible answer can be found in the *New Essays*, where Leibniz states that:

According to the order of things, an identity which is apparent to the person concerned – one who senses himself to be the same – presupposes a real identity obtaining through each immediate transition accompanied by reflection, or by the sense of ‘I’; because an intimate and immediate perception cannot be mistaken in the natural course of things.⁵⁰

If we suppose that the same thinking was behind Leibniz’s remarks in “On unities and transmigration”, we can see that the problem at the heart of his third objection is that the replacement mind in Leibniz’s body would have Leibniz’s memories and therefore think that it is Leibniz (in the sense of being physically identical with Leibniz) even though it is not. In such a case, the replacement mind would be mistaken about its physical identity, because it would suppose – naturally, but mistakenly – that moral identity tracks physical identity. Leibniz’s assumption seems to be that since minds naturally suppose that moral identity tracks physical identity, it would be incongruous if the world had been so established as to make it so that this supposition was sometimes wrong, and as a result he concludes that the world almost certainly hasn’t been established that way, and that therefore the transmigration of minds almost certainly does not occur. This version of transmigration would thus violate what Leibniz called “the principle of order”, which ensures that “*the more things are*

⁴⁷ A VI 6 244/NE 244 [translation modified].

⁴⁸ A VI 6, 245/NE 245.

⁴⁹ A VI 6, 242/NE 242.

⁵⁰ A VI 6, 236/NE 236.

analyzed the more they satisfy the intellect".⁵¹ Or to put it another way, this version of transmigration – which would involve God creating minds that naturally suppose moral identity tracks physical identity despite this not always being the case – would run counter to Leibniz's non-negotiable belief that God has established things in the wisest way.⁵²

Conclusion

"On unities and transmigration", then, is a peculiar text in that Leibniz does not engage with a "generic" theory of transmigration, involving the bare idea of souls passing from one body to another, but instead tackles three specific versions of the doctrine, developing an objection to each of them. That he apparently did not discuss these versions of the doctrine in other works would adequately explain why he did not make use of the objections against them found in this text. There is thus no reason to suppose that Leibniz considered the objections weak.

As should be clear from the foregoing, Leibniz had a lifelong hostility towards transmigration of any form.⁵³ What is perhaps surprising is that this hostility never hardened into a belief that transmigration was impossible.⁵⁴ While Leibniz consistently opposed the doctrine of transmigration, he nevertheless conceded that the doctrine was possible, both in "On unities and transmigration" and in other writings, such as the *New Essays*.⁵⁵ But as he put it in the *New Essays*, "not everything which is possible is therefore in conformity with the order of things".⁵⁶ And this, one feels, is the nub of the matter for Leibniz. Evidently, he believed that God could make souls transmigrate (by a miracle), but would not because he wished to preserve order in his creation.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Leibniz to de Volder, 3 April 1699, A II 3, 545/LDV 71.

⁵² I thus take it that Gabriele Tomasi is on firm ground when he writes "the relationship of dependence existing between moral identity and real identity is not of a logical kind; we are dealing rather with a metaphysical relationship, grounded in the way God has held it fitting to furnish the world he created. It is, in other words, a dependence which is justified in relation to the question "What order is suitable for divine wisdom?"." Gabriele Tomasi, "What is person? Some reflections on Leibniz's approach" in *Individuals, Minds and Bodies*, eds. Massimiliano Carrara, Antonio-Maria Nunziante, and Gabriele Tomasi (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004), 265 n20.

⁵³ Though note that in the *New Essays* Leibniz concedes "If transmigration is not taken strictly, i.e. if anyone thought that souls remain in the same rarefied bodies and only change their coarse bodies, that would be possible, even to the extent of the same soul's passing into a body of another species in the Brahmin or Pythagorean manner." A VI 6, 233/NE 233. However, the version of the doctrine described here does not correspond with how transmigration has been traditionally understood.

⁵⁴ Nevertheless, it is sometimes claimed that Leibniz rejected the very possibility of transmigration; see for example Stewart Duncan, "Leibniz on Hobbes's materialism", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 41 (2010), 11–18, at 16.

⁵⁵ As has been noted before; see Marc Elliott Bobro, *Self and Substance in Leibniz* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2005), 52.

⁵⁶ A VI 6, 233/NE 233.

⁵⁷ My thanks to Blandina Chaza, Daniel J. Cook, Pauline Phemister, and Julia Weckend for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Appendix 1: untitled text (c.1702-5)⁵⁸

[LBr 40 Bl. 22r]

Il n'y auroit point de multitude s'il n'y avoit des veritables unites. Or les veritables unites ne doivent point avoir des parties, autrement elles ne seroient que des amas de ces parties, et par consequent des multitudes, et nullement des veritables unites. On peut même dire que les seules unites sont des Estres entierement reels; puisq les amas ou agregés sont formés par la pensée, qui comprend à la fois telles et telles unites; et toute la realité des choses ne consiste que dans ces unites.

~~D'où il s'ensuit Les unites ne ayent point de parties on a scauro contiennent ce qui est appelle ame dans les animaux, et entelechie dans les autres estres organiques~~

Cela estant puisq il y a ~~un changement~~ quelques attributs modifications et quelques changemens de modification dans les choses, ~~il y~~ il faut que ~~la source de cela~~ cela resulte des modifications et changemens qui sont dans les unites. Et il faut bien aussi que ces unites contiennent quelq realité ~~qui fasse leur diversité. Car la diversité dans un~~ autrement ce seroient des riens. Il faut aussi qu'elles ayent des predicats qui les fasse differentes les unes des autres, ~~et changeants en elles mêmes variées chacune et sujettes à quelq changement et~~ susceptibles du changement.

Or la varieté dans l'unité ou dans l'indivisible ~~ne scauroit estre autre chose que est justement ce que nous appellons perception, et les ames ainsi~~ est justement ce que nous opposons aux modifications de l'étendue, c'est à dire aux figures et mouvemens, et par consequent c'est ce que nous appellons perception, et quelques fois pensée, lors qu'il est accompagné de reflexion. De sorte qu'on voit bien que ces Unites ne sont autre que ~~les ames~~ ce qu'on appelle ame dans les animaux ~~et entelechie ou~~ et principe de vie dans les vivans, ~~et Entelechie en general dans tout~~ et Entelechie primitive dans tous les corps organiques, ou Machines naturelles, qui ont quelq Analogie avec les animaux.

Or n'y ayant point moyen d'expliquer comment une unité a de l'influence sur l'autre et n'estant point raisonnable de recourir à ~~une entremise perpetuelle~~ une direction particuliere de dieu comme s'il donnoit tousjours aux Ames ou Unites ~~ce qui~~ des impressions qui respondent ~~au Corps~~ aux passions du corps; il ne reste que de dire que chaq unité exprime par sa propre nature et suivant son point de veue tout ce qui se passe dehors ~~Ainsi il ne suffit pas~~ De sorte que l'union de l'ame avec [LBr 40 Bl. 22v] son corps, où elle est dominante, n'est autre chose que l'accord spontanée de leur phenomenes.

~~Il ne faut~~ Et puisq on peut tousjours expliquer dans le corps par les loix mecaniques le passage d'une impression à l'autre, il ne faut point s'etonner que l'ame passe ~~de même~~ aussi d'elle même, en vertu de sa nature representative d'une ~~perception à l'autre~~ representation à l'autre, et par consequent de la joye à la douleur tout comme la situation du corps et de l'univers à l'egard de ce corps le demande. Aussi at-il esté bien remarqué par Socrate chez Platon ~~qu'il y a un~~ que le passage de la joye à la que le passage ou trajet du plaisir à la douleur est fort petit.

~~Les ames peuvent estre ne peuvent jamais~~ Il s'ensuit encor de tout cecy que les ames ne scauroient perir naturellement, non plus que l'univers, et qu'il leur doivent tousjours rester des perceptions, comme elles en ont tousjours eues, tant qu'elles ont esté, puisq rien ne leur vient de dehors, et que tout se fait en elles dans une parfait spontanéité.

Cependant il faut avouer qu'elles sont bien souvent dans un estat de sommeil, ou leur perceptions ne sont pas assez distinguées pour attirer l'attention et fixer la memoire. Mais comme chaque ~~ame~~ unité est le miroir de l'univers à sa mode, il est raisonnable de croire,

⁵⁸ LBr 40 Bl. 22-3.

qu'il n'y aura point de sommeil eternel pour elle, et que ses perceptions se developpent dans un certain ordre, le meilleur sans doute qui soit possible. C'est comme dans les crystallisations des sels confondus, qui se separent enfin et retournent à quelque ordre.

Il faut dire encor suivant l'exacte correspondance de l'ame et du corps; que le corps organiq subsiste tousjours, et ne sçauroit jamais estre détruit, de sorte que non seulement l'ame, mais même l'animal doit demeurer. Cela vient de ce que la moindre partie du corps organiq est encor organiq; les machines de la nature estant repliées en elles mêmes à l'infini. Ainsi ny le feu ny les autres forces exterieures n'en sçauroient jamais deranger que l'écorce.

On ne sçauroit tousjours determiner si certaines Masses sont animées ou entelechiées, par ce qu'on ne sçauroit tousjours dire si elles ~~sont organiques~~ forment un corps organiq ou si ce ne sont que des amas, comme par exemple je ne sçaurois rien definir du soleil, du globe de la terre, d'un diamant.

Il y a de l'apparence que toutes les substances intelligentes créées ont un corps organiq qui leur est propre. Ce seroit pourtant une question, s'il n'est pas possible qu'il y en ait qui passent de corps en corps dans un certain ordre, et d'autres qui sont tousjours attachée à un même corps.

[LBr 40 Bl. 23r]

Mais je doute qu'on puisse expliquer distinctement ce changement, et par consequent je doute qu'il est conforme à l'ordre. Car il faudroit supposer la destruction d'un corps organiq, pour le priver de l'ame, car tout corps organiq en a par la raison qu'il en peut avoir sans inconvenient. Et tout corps organiq de la nature, estant infiniment replié, est indestructible. Et la preuve qu'il est infiniment replié, est qu'il exprime tout. De plus le corps doit exprimer l'estat futur de l'ame ou de l'Entelechie qu'il a et cela en exprimant son propre estat future.

Supposé qu'il ne se forment point de nouveaux corps organiques & que les vieux ne se detruisent point, quelle marque aurons nous pour dire que l'ame d'un corps organiq est allé dans l'autre outre que deux ames ne sont point ~~compatibles~~ dans un meme corps organiq; et qu'il faudroit ainsi un echange d'ames. ~~Et comme on ne sçauroit reconnoistre ce changement~~ De plus cet echange d'ames se remarque dans les corps ou non, s'il ne s'y remarque pas, il est contre l'ordre car le corps doit tout exprimer. S'il s'y doit remarquer, il faudroit voir comment cela se peut faire. Quel moyen d'exprimer le passage d'une ame par les loix de mecaniq.

On pourroit pourtant excepter les esprits, ou ce ne seroient pas les loix mecaniques mais des loix morales que marqueroient la translation et l'identité d'une ame avec l'autre. Car j'appelle esprits les Entelechies ou ames, qui sont susceptibles des verités eternelles, sciences et demonstrations, et qui peuvent estre considerés comme sujets d'un gouvernement tel qu'est celui de la Cité de dieu dont le Monarque est la souveraine ~~substance~~ intelligence. Or il se pourroit faire qu'une même intelligence passat d'un corps dans l'autre ~~autrement que par les loix mecaniques~~ : en ce que les loix mecaniques mêmes fissent renaistre ailleurs une vie qui coninuât la mienne, et une intelligence qui s'attribuât ce qui est arrivé à moy; ses perceptions et les mouvemens de son corps (qui s'entre repondent) le menant à une imagination telle qu'en effect elle seroit la memoire du principal qui m'est arrivé, de sorte que moralement cette intelligence seroit moy, et me continueroit. Cela paroist possible, mais il me paroist plus conforme à l'ordre que l'identité morale soit tousjours accompagnée d'une identité physiq, et que chaq Unité, estant ~~un miroir de l'univers~~ l'univers en raccourci, soit bien gouvernée encor selon les loix de la morale.

Appendix 2: On Unities and Transmigration (c. 1702-5)

If there were no true unities, there would be no multitude. Now true unities must not have parts otherwise they would be only accumulations of these parts, and consequently they would be multitudes, and not true unities at all. It may even be said that unities alone are entirely real beings, since the accumulations or aggregates are formed by the thought which includes such and such unities at the same time. And all the reality of things consists only in these unities.

That being so, since there are some modifications and some changes of modification in things, this must be the result of modifications and changes in the unities. And these unities must contain some reality too, otherwise they would be nothing. They must also have predicates which make them different from each other, and capable of change.

Now the variety in the unity, or in the indivisible, is precisely what we oppose to the modifications of extension, that is, to figures and motions, and consequently is what we call perception, and sometimes thought, when it is accompanied by reflection. So it is clear that these unities are nothing other than what are called “souls” in animals, “principle of life” in living things, and “primitive entelechy” in all organic bodies – or natural machines – which have some resemblance with animals.

Now, as there is no way of explaining how one unity has influence on another, and as it is unreasonable to resort to invoking a particular direction of God, as if he always gave to souls or unities impressions which correspond to the body’s passions, it remains only to say that each unity expresses – by its own nature and according to its point of view – everything that happens outside. So the union of the soul with its body, in which it is dominant, is nothing other than the spontaneous agreement of their phenomena.

And since the passage from one impression to another in the body can always be explained by mechanical laws, we should not be surprised that the soul likewise passes, also of itself, by virtue of its representative nature, from one representation to another, and consequently from joy to pain, just as the situation of the body – and of the universe with regard to this body – requires. And it was well noted by Socrates, according to Plato, that the passage or path from pleasure to pain is very short.⁵⁹

From all that it also follows that souls cannot perish naturally, any more than the universe, and that some perceptions must always remain in them, just as they have always had for as long as they have existed, since nothing comes into them from outside, and since everything happens in them in a perfect spontaneity.

Yet it must be admitted that they are quite often in a state of sleep, in which their perceptions are not sufficiently distinguished to attract attention and establish memory. But as each unity is the mirror of the universe in its way, it is reasonable to think that there will be no eternal sleep for it, and that its perceptions develop in a certain order, doubtless the best that is possible. It is like in crystallisations of mixed salts that are finally separated and return to some order.

It should even be said that, accordingly to the precise correspondence of the soul and body, the organic body always subsists, and can never be destroyed, so that not only the soul but also the animal must remain. This is due to the fact that the least part of the organic body is still organic, nature’s machines being folded in themselves to infinity. Thus fire and other external forces can only ever disturb the outside.

We cannot always determine whether certain masses are animated or entelechied, because we cannot always say whether they form an organic body or are only accumulations, as for example I cannot decide anything about the sun, the globe of the Earth, or a diamond.

⁵⁹ See Plato, *Phaedo*, 60b.

There is some probability that all intelligent created substances have an organic body which is proper to them. However, a question would be whether it is possible that there are some substances which pass from body to body in a certain order and others which are always attached to the same body.

But I doubt this change could be distinctly explained, and consequently I doubt it is in conformity with order. For we would have to suppose the destruction of an organic body in order to deprive it of the soul, for every organic body has in it – by dint of reason – what it can fittingly have in it. And every organic body of nature, being infinitely enfolded, is indestructible. And the proof that it is infinitely enfolded is that it expresses everything. Moreover, the body must express the future state of the soul or entelechy that it has, and it does that by expressing its own future state.

Assuming that no new organic bodies are formed and that the old ones are not destroyed, what indication will we have to say that the soul of one organic body has gone into another, besides that two souls are not in the same organic body, and that there would thus have to be an exchange of souls? Moreover, this exchange of souls is noticeable in bodies or it isn't: if it is not noticeable, it is contrary to order since the body must express everything. If it should be noticeable there, we would have to see how that might happen. What means are there of expressing the passage of a soul by the laws of mechanics?

Yet it would be possible to except minds, in which it would be not mechanical laws but moral laws which would record the transfer and the identity of one soul with another. For I call minds the entelechies or souls that have the capacity for eternal truths, sciences and demonstrations, and which may be considered as subjects of a government such as that of the City of God, whose monarch is the supreme intelligence. Now it would be possible for one and the same intelligence to pass from one body into another. In that case, the mechanical laws themselves would make reborn elsewhere a life which continues my life, and an intelligence which claims for itself what has happened to me, its perceptions and the movements of its body (which mutually correspond) leading it to have thoughts that would, in effect, be the memory of the principal things that have happened to me, so that morally this intelligence would be me, and would continue as me. That seems possible, but it seems to me more in keeping with order that moral identity is always accompanied by a physical identity, and that each unity, being the universe in miniature, is governed also according to moral laws.